

The power of stories;
unconventional
narrative in leslie
marmon silko's
ceremony



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In her novel *Ceremony* Leslie Silko overtly breaks from the conventional “Western” narrative. The narrative form that she utilises is broken, merging prose where time is fluid with poetry and stories based in Laguna culture. What she creates is a vivid, idiosyncratic, and often times confusing narrative that, in a manner reminiscent of William Faulkner, creates fully rounded characters within a palpable world. Why, however, does she do so? Silko, through this break from conventional narratives, creates a form that echoes the cultural heritage stories and storytelling have within the Laguna people, a heritage that also highlights the differences between the Native-American Laguna and “white” cultures.

One way in which Silko breaks from narrative convention to echo Laguna culture is through the novel having a sense of self-awareness. The novel opens with a poem that concludes with the lines: “She is sitting in her room / thinking of a story now / I’m telling you the story / she is thinking.”[1] The “she” mentioned is Thought-Woman, one of the creators of the universe alongside her sisters. It is unclear whether the story Thought-Woman is thinking of is that of the novel’s protagonist, Tayo, or the Laguna creation myth that runs through the novel in poetry sections, concerning the attempts of Fly and Hummingbird to bring rain back to the world. Perhaps, however, there is no real distinction between the story of Tayo, his troubles coping with PTSD after surviving a Japanese POW camp during World War Two and his journey towards health through a return to Laguna culture, and the story of Fly and Hummingbird, who themselves try to cope with a crisis through an extensive journey through Laguna culture. Silko creates a narrative where the distinction between her modern piece of fiction and

traditional Laguna myth is not only non-existent, but is self-aware in being so. Silko inserts herself into traditional Laguna narrative, creating, through the journey of Tayo, another entirely new and modern chapter to the Laguna tradition of storytelling.

This opening poem, where Thought-Woman thinks of the story being told to the reader, also encapsulates the creative power storytelling has within Laguna culture. Twice in the poem the same idea is presented, that the world followed Thought-Woman's thoughts: " whatever she thinks about / appears", " Thought-Woman, the spider / named things and / as she named them / they appeared." (Silko, pp. 1) This idea, that ideas came before the world's physical existence, links to the Laguna belief that their stories created the world. This belief, that stories are themselves performative entities of creation, could best be compared in Western terms as adhering to the post-structuralist idea that language creates the world, however difficulties therefore arise through a cultural translation of sorts. If stories create the world, a notion contrary to the Western idea that stories are descriptive of the external world rather than creative, thought thus precedes physical existence. Silko's novel, therefore, creates its own world of sorts. As much as she inserts her narrative into the cultural narrative of the Laguna people, she creates it alongside the myths of the Laguna, ushering it into existence. Silko's break from conventional narrative thus highlights the creative power of stories within Laguna culture.

The creative power of stories is emphasized by the prevalence stories have in Laguna culture at large. Throughout the novel the idea of storytelling is constantly referenced as being essential to the Laguna way of life. Whether <https://assignbuster.com/the-power-of-stories-unconventional-narrative-in-leslie-marmon-silkos-ceremony/>

it is war stories used to coerce a woman into having sex, “ They told her stories too. Later on, when they started looking at her and sitting closer to her” (Silko, pp. 164), or stories meant to heal a broken mind:

“ He was thinking of the ceremony the medicine man had performed over him, testing it against the old feeling, the sick hollow in his belly formed by the memory of Rocky and Josiah, and all the years of Auntie’s eyes and her teeth set on edge” (Silko, pp. 152)

Stories serve many invaluable purposes within Laguna culture. Silko’s narrative, broken and discordant, blends the story of Tayo with the traditional stories of the Laguna people, as well the stories told by the people in Tayo’s life. This three tiered act of storytelling creates a narrative where the importance of storytelling cannot be ignored by the reader. Moreover, many of the stories within the novel, often several pages in length, are told to Tayo by a character through a monologue. For example, the story the Medicine-Man Betonie tells Tayo (starting on page 145 and ending on 152) is written in quotations marks, thus showing that this is not Silko telling the story of Tayo or relaying a traditional Laguna story, but rather a third party. This highlights not only the importance of storytelling within the Laguna culture, but also the importance of the oral tradition with Laguna culture. Storytelling, for the Laguna people, is an intimate, personal, and deeply symbolic act and Silko presents it as so through an array of stories and the mediums they are told through her unconventional narrative.

Through her break from conventional, “ Western” narrative, Silko is able to highlight the differences between white and Laguna cultures with clarity. Of

course, one of the most prominent differences is the idea that stories created the world, an idea that is direct conflict with Western notions of existence where stories are descriptive entities. Moreover, the prevalence of stories and the oral tradition are another difference between the Laguna and white cultures. For example, traditional stories act in Laguna culture as fact, in direct contrast to Western notions of fact: “ The science books explained the causes and effects. But Old Grandma always used to say, “ Back in time immemorial, things were different”. (Silko, pp. 94) However, possibly one of the most noticeable contrasts in cultures is the notion of time and its effect on narrative. In the novel, there is no such thing as linear time, but rather a more fluid approach where there is little distinction between the past, present, and mythic. It is unclear, for example, whether the opening of the prose narrative is past or present, Tayo in the hospital after returning from War or Tayo in his shepherd’s huts (Silko, pp. 5); perhaps this is due a lack of linear time as a concept in Laguna culture, or perhaps the confusion is a projection of Tayo’s PTSD. As the novel progresses the reader can often get lost in the story due to the lack of distinction between past and present, the novel lacking an anchored center that is necessary for a conventional narrative to work. Silko abandons the conventional narrative and creates a narrative of her own that is centered in Laguna culture and a Laguna way of thinking, a way of understanding the world.

In Ceremony, Silko abandons conventional narratives in order to portray a Laguna life, Tayo’s, while still adhering to the Western form of the novel. In order to breach the gap between the Western form and Laguna culture, a culture based highly in the oral tradition of stories, Silko mixes the two into a

broken and eclectic narrative, where prose and poetry have equal importance and where time becomes fluid and indiscernible. Silko's unconventional narrative allows a translation of sorts of the traditional Laguna story into one that adheres to a Western form. The unconventional narrative is less of a compromise to allow Western insight into the life and culture of the Laguna, but rather a hybrid form where the differences between Western and Native are set aside for the sake of storytelling.